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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BANGKOK 000677

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TAGS: [PGOV PHUM TH](#)

SUBJECT: SONDHI'S LAST STAND

REF: A. BANGKOK 636

[1](#)B. 05 BANGKOK 7197

Classified By: Deputy Chief of Mission Alex A. Arvizu, reason 1.4 (b) (d)

[1](#)1. (C) SUMMARY: Crusading Thaksin critic Sondhi Limthongkul will hold his final rally on Saturday. Police are estimating that up to 100,000 people may participate. The local rumor mill is full of forebodings of pro-government 'thugs' disrupting the event, but police plan to have a large presence to keep the peace. Participants may come from a range of groups opposing the government, including NGOs and individuals upset by the Shin Corp deal (ref A). A very large and enthusiastic rally will further weaken Thaksin, but the PM has again declared he will not step down and we don't see any way that this rally could force his hand. As always, Thaksin's greatest threat is from himself; a hasty or intemperate response to the provocation would do him more harm than the demonstration itself. Thaksin has decided to spend the day on Saturday up at a Burmese refugee camp along the border, accompanied by representatives of many local embassies. END SUMMARY

[1](#)2. (U) Thaksin's most vocal critic, Sondhi Limthongkul, will hold his "last" rally on Saturday, February 4. After some weeks of declining attendance at his weekly show at Lumpini Park, Sondhi called for one final, big rally. Originally, he called for his supporters to meet at Sanam Luang, the site of historic protests against past military governments. However, for reasons not entirely clear, the location was changed to the Chulalongkorn monument in the Royal Plaza Park. Demonstrators will gather at the monument for music and entertainment in the early afternoon, march to the nearby home of Privy Council President Prem Tinsulananda to deliver a petition about 4:00, and then return to the monument for Sondhi's regular weekly performance. Police have upped their estimate of the expected number of demonstrators, now saying that "up to 100,000" are expected.

WHERE DO THEY ALL COME FROM?

[1](#)3. (SBU) Given that Sondhi's "regular" Friday night crowd had dwindled to perhaps 10,000 or less, many people thought his final demonstration might turn out to be a dud. Sondhi, however, has been touring the country to build up support, holding rallies in Khon Kaen (where the police tried to shut him down), Surat Thani, Nakhon Si Thammarat, Trang, and other places. Like other before it, this rally is not so much pro-Sondhi as it is anti-Thaksin; everyone with a beef against the government seems to feel like this is a good chance to express it. Sondhi's website says that they have distributed more than 500,000 guidebooks telling people the "do's and don't's" of participating in the rally. According to a very informal post survey, some of the groups expected to turn out include:

-- Teachers from the Northeast and Central region, who oppose the government's plan to transfer the education administration from the central government Ministry of Education to the local administration. Small numbers from this group participated in previous Sondhi rallies. The coordinator for teachers vowed to bring in 100,000 demonstrators.

-- Supporters of the northeastern monk Luangta Maha Bua. (ref B) Between 500-1000 of the monk's supporters have been turning out for the Friday rallies.

-- Bangkok based NGOs, coordinated by the Campaign for Popular Democracy, as well as non-affiliated Bangkok residents, both the committed and the curious.

-- Network of northeastern farmers, expected to number up to [1](#)5000.

-- People from the Southern provinces.

Although many academics will be participating, there is no indication of any organized student participation.

[1](#)4. (C) Who else will be there? Authorities say they will have some 3000 police deployed, with another 10,000 on standby. There is widespread concern that pro-Thaksin supporters will try to cause trouble. At the last rally in Lumpini Park, about some hundreds of employees of the Park Service crashed the party and caused localized disturbances and confrontations. This group may have been responsible for throwing some firecrackers to spook the crowd. There is

suspicion that this group will return, as well as fears that other pro-Thaksin "thugs" may turn up.

15. (C) Who won't be there? The military has made it clear that they don't plan to be involved. The Army Chief told the press that the military would not take any action unless the situation went out of control and a state of emergency was declared. Other military contacts have been reluctant to comment about the rally, even in informal discussions.

16. (C) Prime Minister Thaksin won't be in town for most of the day. On Thursday, embassies received an urgent invitation to accompany him to Tak province for the day to visit a Burmese refugee camp and discuss humanitarian issues connected to the refugee issue. (Post refugee coordinator will participate.) Some of the protesters who plan to come also may not make it, according to the local rumor mill. We hear that governors have been ordered to stay on the job on Saturday and try to discourage participation from their provinces. People anticipate that buses will be stopped for minor traffic infractions, a tactic reportedly used in the past.

WHAT DO THEY WANT?

17. (C) Sondhi keeps telling the press that it is not his goal to overthrow the government. That's good, because this demonstration doesn't look like it will even come close to having that kind of impact. But it should be an impressive show of opposition to a government, and most particularly a Prime Minister, that has made some serious mistakes and alienated a lot of people. Thaksin's highly controversial Shin Corp sell-off (ref A) is a great big Chinese new years present from the PM to his most ardent critic, and public concern about the sale should significantly swell the numbers attending. A huge turnout will further weaken the PM, who is firm in his refusal to consider himself embattled -- he told the press today that he would resign "in his next life."

18. (C) The pressure on Thaksin and his ruling Thai Rak Thai (TRT) party may be having some effect already. Today, the Culture Minister, wife of the leader of one of the TRT factions, announced her resignation. We have been hearing for several weeks that the faction led by formerly powerful politician Snoh Thienthong was considering leaving TRT. Snoh is reportedly disgruntled that he and his faction have not been treated with sufficient respect inside TRT. The reasons for Culture Minister Uraiwan Thienthong's resignation are not yet clear. She cited "political ethics" but said that her resignation was not due to the Shin Corp deal. The timing, on the eve of this major anti-Thaksin event, doesn't appear to be a coincidence.

WHAT WILL HAPPEN?

18. (C) At a meeting today with government officials, the Ambassador asked what was likely to happen on Saturday. An MFA official present said it was like a bunch of ants attacking an elephant. What mattered, he said, was what the elephant did. Most observers keep reaching the same conclusion: much will depend on Thaksin's response to events. The official noted some concern over the PM's regular weekly radio address on Saturday morning -- would the PM be cool and reassuring, or would he be "his usual self?" Another official underscored the importance of the Culture Minister's resignation, and said that that it would be important to watch her statements closely. He also noted the shift in tone in some of the normally pro-Thaksin print media in the past three days, as the concerns about the Shin Corp. deal have grown. Thai Rath, by far the largest circulation paper in the country, had printed some articles unusually critical of the PM. This was a significant new development.

19. (C) At the same time, the officials agreed that Thailand had changed, and "no one" talked about a coup anymore. No one was looking for a "knight on a white horse" to resolve political problems. The Ambassador noted that there was still occasional discussion of 'extra-constitutional' ways to resolve political problems, but in general agreed with their assessment. The official noted that, as it was unclear what would happen on Saturday, he had consulted an astrologer. According to that source, the rally would be big, but the Prime Minister would survive it. We think that's about right.

BOYCE